Article

Bloody widows? Discourses of tradition and gender in Ghanaian politics

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Abstract

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, although there have been steady increases in the number of women in politics, widespread gender inequalities persist. This is particularly pervasive in patriarchal societies where gender norms and practices are deeply entrenched, with socio-cultural barriers often cited as some of the key impediments to women's search for political power. There have, therefore, been calls to remove such barriers for effective participation. Unfortunately, some events that occurred before Ghana's 2020 election discourage, rather than encourage, women's participation in governance. With data from articles, headlines and comments from various online media outlets, this paper examines three events that reinforce what may be called 'a bloody widow discourse' in Ghana's politics. Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper shows how traditional norms and expectations associated with widowhood can be perceived as barriers to women's (and not men's) quest for political power, thereby sustaining the unequal gender and power relations in politics. The use of allusion, rhetorical questions and presuppositions further perpetuate a 'blame-the-widow' discourse which makes the women appear unworthy of the power they seek.

Keywords

Feminist critical discourse analysis, Ghana, gender bias, media discourse, political discourse, tradition, widowhood rites, widow's succession, women and politics

Introduction

Gender politics permeates almost every area of our social lives. Institutions such as the family, politics, among others, are embedded with all kinds of gender and power issues. This is especially so for patriarchal societies, like Ghana, because of their deeply

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entrenched gender norms and practices. For instance, in politics, which is seen as a male dominated space, there are issues of women's representation, gender biases and power imbalances (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021a; Musah and Garibah, 2013; Sossou, 2011). The Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) report on Ghana's parliament, for example, shows that women occupy 40 out of the 275 parliamentary seats, representing 14.55% (IPU, 2021b). The IPU's UN Map of Women in Politics also shows that although there have been steady increases in the number of women at the highest levels of political power globally (e.g., 13 countries now have 50% or more women in ministerial positions), widespread gender inequalities persist. This is in spite of the many calls for women's inclusion and participation in governance on the basis of the claims that women have a lot of potential that can be harnessed for economic, social and political growth (see Abakah, 2018; Allah-Mensah, 2005; Musah and Gariba, 2013; Sossou, 2011). Indeed, Musah and Gariba's (2013) work on Ghana's parliament indicates that some of the inequalities play out in how economic, political and socio-cultural (e.g., stereotypical gender roles like a stay-home mum) barriers are created to impede the effective participation of women. Sossou (2011: 1) therefore believes that 'processes of democratization, changes in institutional rules, and changes to the culture of politics and political parties that encourage inclusion and equality are necessary for women's effective political participation' in Ghana (and beyond).

Unfortunately, events that occurred in the period leading to Ghana's 2020 general election suggest that we are far from encouraging women's participation in Ghana's politics. In this paper, therefore, I examine what I call a 'bloody widow discourse' – a discourse that is linked to an event that occurred in Ghana's parliament in February 2019 and similar events in October and December 2020. The paper focuses on how some minority members of parliament (MPs) tagged a female MP-elect a 'bloody widow' (utilizing the dual senses of the word 'bloody' – an event characterized by bloodshed, or an expression of anger or disgust; see 'the bloody widow' section for further discussion). Drawing on the use of forms such as allusions, rhetorical questions, and some properties of discourse semantics (e.g., lexicalization, implications and presuppositions; see van Dijk, 1995), I show how the 'bloody widow' tag can be associated with subsequent events involving other female politicians who lost their husbands before the 2020 elections.

To properly contextualize the study, the next section provides a brief history of widows replacing their husbands in Ghana's parliament and some background to the bloody widow discourse. Further contextualization is provided in the section that follows it, which discusses the components of the widowhood rites in Ghana as a significant background to understanding why being a widow creates barriers for women who seek political power. Following that is a section which situates the current study in previous studies on women and politics in Ghana and beyond. The next section after that focuses on Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as a useful theoretical framework in analyzing the hidden agenda of the bloody widow discourse. This is followed by methods, research findings and discussion, in that order. The final section concludes the study.

Widow's succession and the bloody widow discourse

Widow's succession is not a new practice (see Adams, 2019; Congressional Research Service report, 2021; Jalalzai and Hankinson, 2008; Solowiej and Brunell, 2003). It is a

practice (from the early 20th century) of replacing politicians who died in office with their widows to retain their seats. As such, many of such women in the early years were seen as mere placeholders who did not progress to become prominent politicians (but some have also demonstrated their individual ability; see Jalalzai and Hankinson, 2008). Indeed, the thinking behind this practice was to ride on the popularity or sympathies of their dead politician husbands while 'more conventional – male – candidates prepared for the next "real" campaign' (Adams, 2019: 52). Countries which have been noted for practicing it include the United States, Canada, Argentina, New Zealand, among others.[1] For instance, according to a report by the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), 47 women have been elected or appointed to replace their late husbands in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives (CAWP, 2017). In discussing political widowhood in the United States, Jalalzai and Hankinson (2008: 395) also note that 'one of the earliest paths to power for women in the United States Congress was through political widowhood'. But of great significance also is one of their findings that 'women are more liberal and more supportive of women's issues than their husbands' (p.420), thereby making their participation in politics worthwhile for women empowerment.

Although widow's succession is not well recognized and organized in Ghana's politics, a semblance of this exists – what has been referred to by some Ghanaians as 'switching of "Wife-Deceased MPs" Position'.[2] For instance, in December 2000 (less than a week before the 2000 general elections), the New Patriotic Party's (NPP)[3] parliamentary candidate for Asutifi South constituency (Philip Kofi Adjapong Amoah) died after a short illness. The election for that constituency was rescheduled to January 3, 2001, to allow the NPP to prepare. Cecilia Gyan Amoah, the widow of the candidate, was then nominated to take his place in the race and she won the seat. In March 2016, the National Democratic Congress' (NDC) parliamentary candidate for Shai Osudoku constituency (William Ocloo) died in a car crash. His wife (Linda Obenewaa Akweley Ocloo) was nominated to contest for the seat in the 2016 general election, and she won the seat.

Again, the NPP member of parliament for the Ayawaso West Wuogon constituency (Emmanuel Kyeremanteng Agyarko) died on November 21, 2018 after a short illness. The party nominated his second wife (Lydia Seyram Alhassan) on December 29, 2018 to contest for his seat in a by-election. The election, which was held on January 31, 2018, was characterized by bloodshed (and this is what started the 'bloody widow' discourse). The following is an extract of a report by the West African Network for Peace Building (WANEP) about the violence:

> Some armed men clothed in National Security apparel stormed the polling station and attacked some polling agents believed to be [members of] the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC). Eighteen people suffered gunshot wounds and injuries in the ensued attack. Reports indicated that the armed men also stormed the residence of the NDC candidate, Delali Kwasi Brempong. Mr. Sam George, the NDC Member of Parliament for Ningo Prampram, was also assaulted by unidentified men (WANEP 2019: 1).

The NDC therefore announced its withdrawal from the election.[4] With 12, 041votes, Ms Alhassan was declared winner by the electoral commission on January 31, 2018 (the NDC candidate got 5, 341).[5] During a swearing-in ceremony of Ms Alhassan in

parliament on February 5, 2019, the NDC MPs staged a walk-out holding placards with the inscription 'BLOODY WIDOW' (a copy of this is provided under 'data analyses and findings'). This was condemned by various interest groups and individuals (e.g., Pepper Dem Ministries, Majority's women caucus in parliament).

Again, in October 2020, the NPP Member of Parliament for Mfantseman constituency (Ekow Quansah Hayford) was killed in a suspected highway robbery. His wife was also nominated to contest for the seat in the December 2020 election and she won. This generated headlines such as:

a. 4 wives of Members of Parliament who replaced their husbands in parliament
b. Wives of deceased MPs who succeeded them in parliament
c. Four widows fulfill husband's MP ambition
d. Mfantseman seat: Another widow to make political gains from husband's death
e. Replacing deceased MPs with their spouse, relative is dangerous – Political scientist

Like it happens elsewhere in countries that practice widow's succession, media reports and comments in Ghana's case suggest that the parties nominated these women in order to ride on the popularity or public sympathies of their dead husbands – note the phrase 'Another widow to make political gains from husband's death' in (d) above. Seeing this as a political gain obviously has implications for the bloody widow discourse. There were, in fact, a lot of questions regarding the use of the phrase 'bloody widow' in 2019, but even more interesting is how this phrase serves as a reference point for two subsequent incidents involving other widows (note that one was not succeeding her husband). These are discussed under the 'data analyses and findings' section.

Widowhood rites in Ghana and its implications for the bloody widow discourse

One of the key things about the bloody widow discourse is the fact that the three women in question are all widows, and participants in the various conversations make statements that point to what is expected of widows. It is thus important to consider the norms and practices of widowhood in Ghana and their implications for the bloody widow discourse.

According to Korang-Okrah (2011) and Korang-Okrah and Haight (2015), although the widowhood rites in Ghana may have some variations depending on the ethnic group or the family in question, it typically consists of 40 days confinement, sleeping on a mat instead of a mattress for 40 days, 15 days public crying/wailing, one meal a day, bathing cold water three times a day, dressing in black and avoiding suitors for at least a year (see Korang-Okrah and Haight, 2015: 228 and 232). There may also be some slight variations in contemporary society as a result of enlightenment and cosmopolitan lifestyles (Tei-Ahontu, 2008). For instance, the period of confinement may not necessarily mean being locked up in a room for the entire period for some people, but it prohibits being involved in public activities. Studies which have identified similar practices outlined by Korang-Okrah and

Haight (2015) include Amlor and Owusu (2016; among the Ewe of Ghana), Tei-Ahontu (2008; among the Ga of Ghana), Aransiola and Ige (2010; among the Yoruba of Southern Nigeria), Nwokoroa and Ogbab (2019; in Southeastern Nigeria) and Ude and Njokwu (2017; in Sub-Saharan Africa). Women who refuse to observe the widowhood rites 'may experience social ostracism and coercion from their husbands' families' (Korang-Okrah and Haight, 2015: 228; see also Tei-Ahontu, 2008). Men, on the other hand, do not perform any such rites (Korang-Okrah and Haight, 2015) – indeed, the wording 'widowhood' and not 'widowerhood' rites is in itself gendered and discriminatory. However, there are expectations that a widower will also dress in black for a period of time to signify mourning, but note that this is a general practice for mourning in Ghana (i.e., other close relatives like parents, siblings, children are also expected to dress in black).

Commenting on the Akan widowhood rites, which also serves as rites-of-passage performed for the woman's purification, protection, and healing, Korang-Okrah and Haight argue that while the widowhood rites may be experienced by women as supportive, by connecting them to others, they may also be experienced as oppressive by reinforcing their lower status and power (2015: 228). For instance, in a report by Ayagiba et al. (no date) to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it is noted how widows in Ghana face social stigma as they are 'routinely accused by the community of having caused the death of their husband, or even of literally killing their husbands' (p. 1). As a result, some of the widowhood rites include practices that require these widows to prove their innocence (see also Nwokoroa and Ogbab, 2019).

I particularly find the 40 days confinement, 15 days of public crying and this 'blame-the-widow' mentality useful in explaining why these widows probably 'deserve' to be described as 'bloody', as implied or presupposed in some of the posts. I return to these in the data analyses and findings section.

Women and politics

Politics has often been thought of globally as a 'quintessential male sphere of action, one in which women are both unwelcome and ineffective' (Sossou, 2011: 2). Many studies have therefore reported the underrepresentation of women in this space (Diabah and Agyepong, unpublished; Kivoi, 2014; Madsen, 2019; Sossou, 2011; Taoyang, 2019). Commenting on the situation in Ghana, Sossou (2011) for instance notes that although the constitution of Ghana theoretically gives women equal rights as their male counterparts for active participation in governance, 'in practice, women face issues of gender-based power imbalance and discrimination in addition to other structural, institutional, cultural, and traditional barriers and roadblocks' (p.1); and these have led to their underrepresentation at all levels of governance. It is worth noting, however, that some women have broken through the glass ceiling and a few more continue to do so (e.g., Sophia Akuffo Georgina and Theodora Wood, former Chief Justices; Joyce Bamford-Addo, former speaker of parliament; Jean Mensa, Chairperson of the Electoral Commission). Indeed, Ghana almost had its first female vice-president in the 2020 election since the leading opposition party chose a female (Prof. Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang) as a vice-presidential candidate. Diabah and Agyepong (unpublished) also report that although the

numbers are still low compared to global trends, women's representation in Ghana's parliament has gradually been increasing since the beginning of the democratic era (from 8% in 1992 to 15% in 2020). But, as Sossou (2011) argues, most of the politically active women are members of the elite group. With their better education and wealth, these women often pursue a political agenda that reflects their class rather than their gender interests (House-Midamba, 1990).

While I could not find any study on widowhood as a barrier to women's participation in politics (in fact it encourages participation in some cultures, as noted earlier), there are several studies that cite various sociocultural norms and practices as barriers to women's participation in this space (see Anderson et al., 2011; Kivoi, 2014; Maguire, 2018; Musah and Gariba, 2013; Sossou, 2011; Taoyang, 2019). For instance, in her study on women's participation in parliament and local government in the UK, Maguire (2018) notes that the three key barriers to women's participation in this space are social and cultural, structural and institutional, and knowledge and information barriers. On sociocultural barriers, women's continued role in assuming caring and household responsibilities is seen as a significant barrier, especially for younger women and those who have young children (p. 6). On his part, Taoyang (2019: 41) argues that certain patriarchal beliefs among the North Region people of Cameroon (e.g., that God has not given certain socially high offices to women but only to men) are seen as impediments to women's participation in political leadership. Kivoi's (2014) study on the factors impeding political participation and representation of women in Kenya similarly notes how deeply entrenched customs and patriarchal norms and practices militate against women's political efforts. For example, he argues that 'in a number of Kenyan communities, single and divorced women cannot be allowed to run for political office and those who do are ridiculed and insulted in public meetings' (Kivoi, 2014: 178). He further notes how 'in most African communities, women are not allowed to address men in public because it is considered taboo to do so' (p.178). Taoyang (2019) corroborates this in his study by citing Muslim women in the North Region of Cameroon. This limits these women's aspirations to become political leaders since seeking power requires that they engage with various people (including men) during political rallies etc. Women who are politically active are also labeled as 'irresponsible' and therefore not fit to be 'wife material' since they are 'loose' (Kivoi, 2014: 179). Men, on the other hand, have no such restrictions or social stigma because of the established belief that politics is a domain for men (Kivoi, 2014; Sossou, 2011).

As I shall discuss later, this is similar to how widowhood and its associated norms appear to create barriers for women (and not for men) who seek political power – unlike other places like the US where widow succession has been used as a great way of increasing women's participation in political governance.

Feminist critical discourse analysis

This paper is guided by Lazar's (2005, 2007) Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA). The central concern of FCDA, according to Lazar (2005: 5), is 'critiquing discourses which sustain a patriarchal social order: that is, relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclude and disempower women as a social group'. This is in response to the fact that society is filled with many unequal gender practices and power imbalances. Although there are overt representations of male

dominance, discrimination against women etc. in discourse, much of these are represented in subtle ways in contemporary society. Therefore, like Litosseliti's (2006: 55–56) argument about CDA, FCDA 'has an explicit interest in making transparent the 'hidden agenda' of discourse – which, for instance, may be responsible for creating and sustaining gender inequalities'. FCDA analysts therefore critique or develop analytical resistance to these unequal gender and power relations in discourse. For instance, in Agyepong and Diabah's (2021) application of FCDA to their research on social media representations of the girls in a popular Science and Math quiz in Ghana, they show how the posts represent girls (in contrast with boys) not only as unfit for science and math, but also as 'usurpers who need to be kept where they "belong'" (p.287). As they rightfully point out, this is not only demoralizing for the girls, but it is a 'spit in the face of the significant progress women have made over the years to break through the glass ceiling' (Diabah and Agyepong, 2021: 287). By uncovering, contesting and reinterpreting the 'hidden agendas' of discourse, they sought to highlight the power and strength of women and to recast the sexist discourse that characterized the contest.

Similarly, I find this framework useful in analyzing how traditional norms and expectations associated with widowhood can be perceived as barriers to women's (and not men's) quest for political power, thereby sustaining the unequal gender and power relations in Ghanaian politics. Focusing on the different senses of specific words, as well as discourse semantics properties like implications, presuppositions (see van Dijk, 1995), among others, the paper uncovers and critiques certain hidden agendas of the bloody widow discourse.

Methods

Data for this study were sourced from articles and headlines from various online platforms (e.g., Joy online, Citi Newsroom, TV3 network, Peacefm online, GhanaWeb, Modern Ghana, BBC Pidgin). Posts and comments from social media outlets like Facebook[6] and YouTube were also considered. The data were gathered using certain key phrases like 'bloody widow', 'nomination of late MP's wife', and 'Nana Konadu's election', among others. After carefully reading through all the data set, those that directly address my research objectives were selected for analysis. For example, posts that point to justifications of the use of 'bloody widow' as well as comments that alluded to it were considered significant in addressing the issue of the hidden agenda of discourse. In all, 17 headlines, 3 articles, 2 videos (5 minutes 14 seconds for both), 1 interview audio (7 minutes 30 seconds), 1 cartoon and 11 comments (excluding those in the Appendix) have been analyzed in this paper.

In the data presentation, initials, consisting of the first and last name, are assigned to comments made by specific individuals. Some comments have also been slightly 'cleaned up' for readability. The findings are presented in the following section.

Data analyses and findings

This section focuses on the analyses of and findings from the three cases surrounding the bloody widow discourse. Whilst the event described in the next section is seen as the

Figure 1. Bloody widow placard.
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwSFfkIq97s (accessed 20 April 2021).

'original' or the beginning of the bloody widow discourse, the events in 7.2 and 7.3 reinforce this political discourse.

Sources for all the data used are provided in the reference section, under 'data sources'. These have been tagged with specific example numbers for easy identification.

The bloody widow discourse

As noted earlier (see the second section), what I am referring to as the 'bloody widow discourse' started when minority members of Ghana's parliament walked out of parliament during a swearing in ceremony of a female MP (a widow), holding placards that read 'BLOODY WIDOW' (see Figure 1). It is worth noting here again that this is a woman who contested for her late husband's seat in parliament and won, although the election was characterized by violence and bloodshed.

Prior to her election and the incident in parliament, people raised questions about whether it was proper for *a woman in mourning* to seek for political power. The following Facebook and YouTube comments posted after her nomination illustrate these points further:

Example 1

a. The end time is so close, **a widow that should have been in grief is rather disparate [desperate] for power**, and this shows how **she was eyeing the seat of her husband** before his demise (HN)
b. Very shameful and the party also taught [thought] it wise to put her on. . .**How can you contest for your demise [late] husband's seat, who is not even buried?** This world. hmmm. Am gutted as an NPP supporter, **no moral standard** (NY)

c. This is a shame, **how can a woman whose husband hasn't been buried do this?** All those men behind her, would they be happy if their wives do this when they are gone? This shows **she is not the real wife. She never loved that man**. God have mercy, a disgrace to womanhood (FM)
d. Is a shame to have even accept[ed] the call of the people. How will you feel in parliament even if u win the general election? **Is it[this] how to honor the great man?** Woman be smart. (ZD)

From these examples, people reiterate the point that this is a woman who is supposed to be in mourning, and as such she is not expected to be 'desperate for power' (a). Her action is therefore described as a shame (b, c, d), lack of moral standards (b), a disgrace to womanhood (c), lack of love (c) and a dishonor to the dead (d). Note the use of the various rhetorical questions here (b, c, d), which indirectly (through the discourse semantics property of presupposition) point to norms and practices of widowhood in Ghana. For instance, by filing for nominations and being on national televisions and on various social media platforms,[7] she is seen as violating the 40 days confinement period widows are expected to observe (see Korang-Okrah & Haight, 2015). Indeed, NY and FM's comments about doing all these whilst her husband has not even been buried (which goes against traditional norms associated with mourning) paint her as wicked and undeserving of the title 'real wife' (FM).[8] Another important point worth noting is HN's accusation that 'she was eyeing the seat of her husband', something which aligns with findings from some studies that women are often accused of having a hand in their husbands' death (see CEDAW report, and Nwokoroa & Ogbab, 2019).

'Bloody widow': Is it because she is a woman? After the incident in parliament, many people (especially gender activists) in Ghana and beyond condemned the action of the minority MPs, among calls for apology. In condemning the act, most people saw the action of the MPs as being openly sexist. The major question people asked can be summed up in the headline '"Bloody widow": Is it because she is a woman?'[9] In response to this (and other) questions, some MPs provided some justifications for their action. The following are extracts of their justifications:

Example 2

a. That phrase without the context can be offensive; but the explanation given should suffice, that widows were not the target . . . Our point has always been that **she is a beneficiary of a bloody process**, and as a widow who has lost somebody that was so dear to her, we expected her to lead calls for the punishment and identification of those bandits and especially to show some sympathy for those whose blood was spilled for her to emerge as the winner (AS)
b. She is a product and **a beneficiary of a bloody process** . . . and **she is a widow**, yeah that is a bloody widow. It is not an insult. **We described the outcome of the process, and she being a product of the process** . . . (IF)
c. When somebody says something is **bloody, it means that we are unhappy about it. We are upset about it**. . . . I am sure you have heard expressions like a bloody liar, bloody idiot and the rest of it . . . I am not sure the sensibility of the person is in any way offended simply because we expressed in English using many adjectives . . . **[she was] a beneficiary of a system that was flawed** (RM)

The extracts in Example 2 draw attention to the meaning of the word 'bloody'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (powered by Oxford Lexico), situations described as bloody are those 'involving or characterized by bloodshed or cruelty'.[10] For the second sense of the word 'bloody', the Cambridge English Dictionary notes that it is 'used to express anger or to emphasize what you are saying in a slightly rude way'.[11] Both AS and IF draw on the first meaning of the word 'bloody' because the election was characterized by bloodshed (note that 18 people received gunshot wounds and other injuries). The bloodshed is illustrated by the cartoon in Figure 2, which shows people on the floor with blood all over the place as the MP-elect walks over them with impudence:

Figure 2. A representation of the 2019 Ayawaso by-election violence.
Available at: https://3news.com/cartoon-welcome-for-wuogon/ (accessed 20 February 2021).

In Example 2c, RM also references the second meaning of the word 'bloody' by arguing that they used that phrase to register their anger and displeasure about the events of the day, which he sees as 'flawed'. Based on these justifications, the question that needs answering then is why were they vilified for calling her a 'bloody widow'? Indeed, the election was characterized by bloodshed, the minority MPs were angry about it and felt it was cruel of her not to have even condemned the violence publicly; and she is a widow (as reiterated by IF in 2b).

As a counter to this argument, it is important to note that by-election violence (including those characterized by bloodshed) in Ghana's politics is not new. Information available on the internet and in some of the literature on Ghana's politics attest to this fact (see Ijon, 2020). For instance, Table 1 gives details of some by-elections in Ghana which were characterized by bloodshed.

From Table 1, only men emerged as winners in each of the cases, but in none of these cases was the man in question referred to as a 'bloody man' or a 'bloody MP'.[12] The most

Table 1. By-election in Ghana characterized by violence/bloodshed.

Constituency	Year of election	Winner	Political Party
Talensi	2015	Benson Tongo Baba	NDC
Atiwa	2010	Kwesi Amoako Atta	NPP
Akwatia	2009	Kofi Asare	NPP
Chereponi	2009	Samuel Abdulai Jabanyite	NDC

recent one (the Talensi case in 2015) saw a member of the same group that walked out and called this woman a bloody widow emerging as a winner. Indeed, in the interview of IF (a portion of which is reproduced in 2b), when the interviewer quizzed him about why they did not call the males whose elections were also characterized by bloodshed in the past names, he casually said 'there is always a beginning'. Based on these points, and in line with my FCDA stance, it can be argued that there is a hidden agenda of discourse. In other words, there is more to the bloody widow discourse than we were expected to believe (I discuss this further in the discussion section). Subsequent cases similar to this actually reinforce the hidden agendas in this 'bloody widow' discourse. These cases are examined in the next two sections.

Another 'bloody widow'?

In this second incident, the NPP member of parliament for Mfantseman (Ekow Quansah Hayford) was killed in a suspected highway robbery on October 9, 2020, barely 2 months before the general election. 9 days after his death, his wife (Ophelia Hayford) was nominated by the party to contest for the seat. This generated a lot of discussion, with headlines such as those in Example 3:

Example 3

a. NPP confirms wife of slain Mfantseman MP as parliamentary candidate
b. NPP chooses late Mfantseman MP's widow to replace husband for election 2020
c. Widow of murdered MP resigns from police service to represent Mfantsiman
d. Wife of murdered Mfantseman MP to succeed him as parliamentary candidate – NPP

Because 'discourses "word" or "lexicalize" the world in particular ways' (Fairclough, 2003: 129), one way through which we know a particular perspective or point of view is represented is by examining the vocabularies used. The *presence* or *absence* of certain vocabularies is, thus, a reflection of the angle the author intends to project. It is interesting how none of these headlines mentions the name of the candidate. What is considered *worthy* of attention is the fact that she is a wife or a widow, and equally important is that her husband did not die naturally, but he was 'murdered' or 'slain'. The implication of such representations is how unworthy she appears for the position she seeks – the reason why her husband 'will turn in his grave' as a sign of his displeasure (see Example 4a).

Like the previous case, there were, in fact, questions about whether this is the right thing to do. Some of the headlines are captured in Example 4:

Example 4

a. "Your husband will turn in his grave" – A Plus reacts to Mfantseman MP's comment
b. Replacing deceased MPs with their spouse dangerous – Political scientist
c. Switching of "wife-deceased MPs" position: A dead journey to Ghana's democracy!

In condemning the nomination of Mrs Hayford, these headlines allude to the bloody widow discourse and make her appear not only as a 'suspect' (see discussion of Example 6), but also as unfit for the position. The use of the word 'switch' suggests that these women did not earn the positions. But unlike some prototypical cases of widow's succession in which the women were seen as mere placeholders, Lydia Alhassan (the so-called bloody widow), for example, proved herself by contesting again and defeating a popular celebrity in the December 2020 elections.

Eleven days after her husband's death, Mrs Hayford submitted her nomination forms at the electoral commission and spoke to the press afterwards. An extract of her speech (in a video posted by Citi News) is reproduced in Example 5 below:

Example 5

First of all, I thank the president . . . for the confidence reposed in me by selecting me to represent my husband, Ekow Quansah Hayford. All your support and prayers prove that we shall continue the good works of my late husband. I am comforted by your display of affection and courage. Let us unite and protect Mfantseman and continue from where Ekow Quansah Hayford left of, and victory will be ours. (OH)

The speech, posted on various media outlets, generated a lot of discussion. Many people expressed their anger and disgust about her behaviour, and especially about expressing her thanks to the president – which they use as evidence of a 'blame-the-victim' discourse. Example 6, which contains extracts of Facebook comments on Joy News' and Citi News' posts of her speech, illustrate these further.

Example 6

a. Ur husband is dead, **instead of u to mourn him u r there fighting for political power**. Why wouldn't u contest him when he was alive, God save our country things r going bad (SS)
b. I have no clue of who killed the man, but I think if this "new culture" continues, **we may lose more male MPs. #Feminists-conspiracy@work?** (HS)
c. These **NPP women will start killing their husbands** for this kind ooo. This is wrong move, and **you are happy thanking the president for giving you the chance** (TB)
d. Elsewhere, this would've made her a **serious suspect** (BT)
e. This woman [is] very very Carlos and very cruel hearted. She should be investigated. wicked woman. your husband was brutally murdered and you are to contest for power? **Disregard for culture and tradition** what a wicked woman, no good thinking Ghanaian should vote for her (LP)

f. **Another bloody widow** in parliament. Death is no more regrettable, it's welcome with opportunities (KA)
g. Your husband is in the ice and you are here preparing to take his place. **Is this an African culture or what is this practice?** Don't we value the memories of dead love ones anymore? (EL)

As shown in the comments above, the authors largely allude to the previous incident – the bloody widow discourse. HS calls it a 'new culture' because a precedence has been set and he sees history repeating itself – something which poses danger to the lives of male MPs (b, c). Indeed, KA makes a direct reference to the previous incident by referring to her as 'another bloody widow' (f). Like in the previous incident, the authors here question the sensibility and moral standards of this widow, making indirect and direct references to culture and tradition (e, g) – a violation of the culture and tradition that impose 40 days of confinement and 15 days of public crying on widows (see 'Widowhood rites in Ghana'; see additional references in a, c, g). For instance, as TB's comment suggests, instead of being at home mourning her husband, she is on national television and other media platforms *happy* and *thanking* the president for giving her the opportunity to serve (c; see Example 3 for her speech). Drawing on the discourse semantics properties of presupposition, 'thanking' the president can be interpreted here as being happy that her husband is dead so she can take over, which makes her 'a serious suspect' like BT notes (d). This 'blame-the-widow' kind of discourse is implied in most of the comments (b, c; see Appendix for more examples), thereby corroborating some findings in the literature that widows are often accused of having a hand in their husbands' death (Ayagiba et al., no date; Nwokoroa and Ogbab, 2019). For example, although HS claims he is not accusing the woman of anything, his rhetorical question 'Feminists-conspiracy@work?' implies an accusation. This question alludes to the debate about the low representation of women in politics and the call for opportunities for more women to participate in the governance of the country (see IPU, 2021a, 2021b; Musah and Garibah, 2013; Sossou, 2011). Thus, his comment presupposes that this 'MP-widow replacement', or more directly, 'killing' their husbands to take up their position in parliament is one of the opportunities for women to get into governance.

Going back to the issue of history repeating itself and on the question of morality, I refer to another incident in 2016 (which of course did not receive the kind of attention these two cases have received).[13] When an NDC parliamentary candidate for Shai Osudoku (William Ocloo) died in a car crash in March 2016, his widow was advised by some members of the party to contest for the seat during the party's primaries – and as one newscaster describes it, she '*shockingly* opted to contest extensively in memory of her husband'.[14] When another prominent member of the party expressed interest and he was 'advised' to let the woman go unopposed, he was quoted as making the following comments:

Example 7

I think if it's a moral question, then the morality in the question has to be actually answered by the widow. Less than four days after the passing of our late parliamentary candidate, posters of the widow started surfacing on social media and we thought it was a joke. We saw it spread on

> social media that she was going to contest and we all said that there was no way this can happen because you have just lost your dear one and **there will be time for mourning, time for funeral, burial, and so on and so forth. It raises a lot of moral questions. What does she know that we did not know as far as this incident is concerned?** (MW)

Like the previous ones, MW also raises the question of morality, hinging on traditions associated with widowhood. He also indirectly latches on the 'blame-the-widow' discourse or mentality through his use of the rhetorical question 'what does she know that we did not know as far as this incident is concerned?'. This innuendo presupposes that she probably had eyes for the seat, and this could be a good influencer to get her husband out of the way – especially since his death was not natural but through a car crash.

A bloody or disrespectful widow?

In 2016, a former First Lady (Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings) defected from NDC, the party her husband (Fl.Lt. Jerry John Rawlings) founded and established her own party (National Democratic Party). She contested for the presidential seat and lost. She again filed her nominations to contest for the seat in the 2020 presidential elections. In less than a month to the election, her husband died after a short illness (November 12, 2020), and there were calls on her to step down from the race as a sign of *respect* to her husband and tradition. The following are some of the headlines:

Example 8

a. Step down from 2020 election race as a sign of respect to Rawlings – Nunoo-Mensah tells Nana Konadu
b. MPs ask Konadu Rawlings to step down
c. Rawlings' death: Pressure mounts on Rawlings' wife, Konadu Rawlings to step down from 2020 election
d. Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings: Jerry Rawlings wife go contest as Presidential Candidate in election 2020 despite calls say make she pull out
e. Wife of Late Jerry Rawlings, Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings to contest in the 2020 Presidential election, despite calls for a withdrawal

Implicit in these headlines (a, b, c) are societal norms and expectations associated with widowhood. For instance, the reason why pressure mounts on her to step down is so she can conform to widowhood norms and practices, and this is a sign of 'respect' to the dead. Refusing to step down (d, e) then is what probably defines her as 'bloody' (see further discussion in the discussion section). But it is worth noting that much of the calls for her to step down came from the NDC (the party she defected from). Some people therefore felt that the calls were aimed at serving the interest of the NDC – that the votes she went away with will probably come to them since her husband was still a member of NDC. However, the large number of headlines that flooded various media outlets about her alleged withdrawal from the race[15] indicates how desperate people (not just NDC members) were indeed waiting for her to step down. It practically felt like 'pushing' her out of the race when she had not decided to, all in the name of being a widow (or so we

were expected to believe). Even if one accepts the argument that the NDC only used this as a strategy to gain more votes, the point still remains that this strategy was adopted because they knew that Ghanaians will be more receptive to the request because of the importance attached to mourning the dead (and this is no mean person than a former president). In line with my FCDA stance, this may be seen as a hidden agenda of discourse.

Although this case is not exactly like the previous ones, a few things can be gleaned from it to support the bloody widow discourse (I return to this in the discussion section).

Discussion

This paper set out to analyze three instances of what is referred to in this study as a 'bloody widow discourse' – looking at an intersection between gender, discourse, politics and tradition. By referencing two senses of the word 'bloody', and through the use of forms such as allusions, presuppositions, and rhetorical questions, the first case sets the stage for the bloody widow discourse. The second case reinforces the bloody widow discourse as some participants make direct reference to the phrase. It also reinforces the discourse through the use of allusion (to the first case) and rhetorical questions – filled with implications and presuppositions. The first and the second cases are similar because both women were replacing their husbands and both cases involved bloodshed (although case one was in connection with the election process and case two was in connection with the MP's death). On the other hand, the third case is slightly different because there was no bloodshed, neither was the widow contesting for her husband's seat. However, taking into consideration the other sense of 'bloody' (as an intensifier to express anger, disgust or dislike for something or an expression of cruelty), her decision to contest (see Example 8: d, e), which was seen by some as a *disrespect* to the dead and tradition, is tantamount to describing her also as 'bloody'. In other words, her action can be described by her accusers as cruel, and they would only be showing their disgust or dislike by seeing her as a bloody widow.

One thing that is common to all the three cases (or 4 cases in retrospect, i.e., if we add the case of Mrs Linda Ocloo in Example 7) is that these women are represented as *chasing* after power instead of mourning their husbands properly. And in each of the cases, there was a violation of the observance of the 40 days confinement period for widows. This brings to the fore a conflict between widowhood and women's quest for political power. The question is whether widowers in similar circumstances would be chastised in the same way (see note 12). As one Facebook comment notes "if it's a man who filed nominations after the death of his wife, society finds no problem with it but when it's vice versa then trouble" (HH).[16] Indeed, the traditional norms, expectations and practices associated with widowhood appear to create barriers for women in their quest for political power. For instance, since the pre-election period requires intensive campaigning, the 40 days confinement period for widows will always create room for people to raise eyebrows, as seen in Examples 1, 6 and 7. The same cannot be said about men since there are no 'widowerhood' rites for men. This is similar to Kivoi's (2014) and Taoyang's

(2019) findings about how certain customs and practices in some African countries stigmatize women (but not men) in politics and limit their effective participation.

In line with my FCDA stance, I argue that this perpetuates the gender and power imbalances in the political space – after all, politics is not for women (Diabah and Agyepong, unpublished; Kivoi, 2014; Sossou, 2011; Taoyang, 2019). By making the fact that these women are widows (who need to follow tradition) a part of the discussion, the authors of the various posts subscribe to a hidden agenda of discourse that is aimed at sustaining gender inequalities or relations of power that favour men and disadvantage women (cf. Lazar, 2005; Litosseliti, 2006). Putting it bluntly, the sociocultural norms and expectations associated with widowhood are used as barriers to discourage women from 'invading' a male-dominated space. Focusing on linguistic forms such as allusion, rhetorical questions, as well as discourse semantics properties like implications and presuppositions (see van Dijk, 1995), I would like to argue that there is a perpetuation of a 'blame-the-widow' discourse or mentality which makes women appear not only as cruel, but, more importantly, as unworthy of the power they seek.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is true that Ghana has made progress in increasing women's participation in politics. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of grey areas that need to be addressed. For example, using sociocultural norms and practices (e.g., widowhood) as the bases for discouraging women from pursing their political dreams only hampers the efforts for inclusive governance. Yet, making women part of the decision-making process is important because studies have shown that women have a lot of potential that can be harnessed for economic, social and political growth (see Abakah, 2018; Allah-Mensah, 2005; Musah and Gariba, 2013; Sossou, 2011). For instance, it can be argued that it is, perhaps, based on her contribution to the Ayawaso West Wuogon constituency that Lydia Alhassan (the so-called 'bloody widow') contested again (in her own right this time) and defeated a popular celebrity in the December 2020 elections. This contrasts with the popular assumption that women who 'benefit' from widow's succession are mere placeholders (Adams, 2019). Removing socio-cultural barriers associated with widowhood is, therefore, key to women's increased and effective participation in politics. I do agree, of course, that it is important to have time and space to mourn one's loss, but it becomes problematic when we make it appear as though only women (and not men) need it. Besides, better results will be achieved if the time for mourning is seen as a personal decision, rather than something *imposed* on only women for a specific period. A call for change through intensified gender activism and academic criticism is therefore in order. Such change must happen not only at the institutional level, but it must trickle down to the personal level with a change in attitudes towards widows who seek political power.

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Notes

1 See Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Widow%27s_succession#Argentina (accessed July 5, 2021).
2 See https://www.modernghana.com/news/1036187/switching-of-wife-deceased-mps-position-a-dead.html (accessed June 26, 2021).
3 This is one of the two major political parties in Ghana. Since 2016, NPP has been the ruling party. The other major party is National Democratic Congress (NDC), which is currently the major opposition party in Ghana. The presidential seat has been rotating between NPP and NDC since Ghana entered the democratic era.
4 The election violence was condemned by various interest groups like The Coalition for Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) and the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE). The Inspector General of Police (IGP) also directed the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to conduct an investigation into the incident.
5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NijAgwpdVTk&t=21s
6 These are made public by the media outlets.
7 Her husband died on November 21, 2018. Her nomination (at party level) was filed and approved on 24th December 2018, and she was elected to represent the party on 29 Dec 2018.
8 One of the headlines captures it this way 'Love is dead, and Emmanuel Agyarko's Widow Lydia Alhassan killed it' (https://www.ghanacelebrities.com/2019/02/04/love-is-dead-and-emmanuel-agyarkos-widow-lydia-alhassan-killed-it-chris-vincent-writes/. (accessed 30 June 2021).
9 https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/Bloody-widow-Is-it-because-she-is-a-woman-724063 (accessed 23 June 2021).
10 https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/bloody (accessed 10 May 2021).
11 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/bloody (accessed 10 May 2021).
12 No information on whether these men were widowers was found. If they were, then it is probably because it is *no news*; after all, there is no tradition that stops men from pursuing their dreams. There was also no information on whether any of these men was replacing his wife in parliament. This would have been very interesting, considering that as people living in a patriarchal society, men generally take the leading and dominant positions; and so, it would be unusual for a man to 'inherit' his wife's power.
13 This could be because the man was not a sitting MP, and it was also the second time something like that had happened. The first one in 2000 was also not about a sitting MP.
14 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HFCm8HasLA (accessed 25 June 2021).
15 Her party was forced to hold a press conference to discount these rumours and silence her accusers https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeJ1BRJ-ZyY (accessed 10 April 2021).
16 https://www.facebook.com/joy997fm/posts/10158804960161894 (accessed 23 June 2021)

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Data sources

Example 1

- a, b: Available at: https://www.facebook.com/joy997fm/posts/10156894148631894 (accessed 25 March 2021).
- c, d: Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOWqDbAmMU8 (accessed 25 March 2021).

Example 2

- a: Available at: https://www.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/politics/201902/374682.php (accessed 26 June 2021).
- b: Available at: https://www.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/politics/201902/374561.php (Accessed 26 June 21).
- c: Available at: https://www.pulse.com.gh/news/politics/minority-defends-calling-ayawaso-mp-lydia-alhassan-bloody-widow/ntgw9k0 (accessed 26 June 2021).

Example 3

- a: Available at: https://citinewsroom.com/2020/10/npp-confirms-wife-of-slain-mfantseman-mp-as-parliamentary-candidate/ (accessed 23 June 2021).

- b: Available at: https://citinewsroom.com/2020/10/npp-confirms-wife-of-slain-mfantseman-mp-as-parliamentary-candidate/ (accessed 24 June 2021).
- c: Available at: https://www.modernghana.com/news/1036187/switching-of-wife-deceased-mps-position-a-dead.html (accessed 23 June 2021).
- d: Available at: https://www.facebook.com/joy997fm/posts/10158804960161894 (accessed 23 June 2021).

Example 4

- a: Available at: https://skyypowerfm.com/your-husband-will-turn-in-his-grave-a-plus-reacts-to-mfantseman-mps-comment/ (accessed 30 June 2021).
- b: Available at: https://www.myjoyonline.com/replacing-deceased-mps-with-their-spouse-relative-is-dangerous-political-scientist/ (accessed 24 June 2021).
- c: Available at: https://www.modernghana.com/news/1036187/switching-of-wife-deceased-mps-position-a-dead.html (accessed 25 May 2021).

Example 5

- Available at: https://www.facebook.com/CitiTVGH/posts/2604646059798422 (accessed 27 June 2021).

Example 6

- a, b, c, d: Available at: https://www.facebook.com/joy997fm/posts/10158804960161894 (accessed 20 June 2020).
- e, f, g: Available at: https://www.facebook.com/CitiTVGH/posts/2604646059798422 (accessed 26 June 2020).

Example 7

- Available at: https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Shai-Osudoku-NDC-I-won-t-step-down-for-Ocloo-s-widow-Whyte-439796 (accessed 28 June 2021).

Example 8

- a: Available at: https://www.myjoyonline.com/step-down-from-2020-election-race-as-a-sign-of-respect-to-rawlings-nunoo-mensah-tells-nana-konadu (accessed 29 June 2021).
- b: Available at: https://www.peacefmonline.com/pages/politics/politics/201107/54426.php (accessed 29 June 2021).
- c: Available at: https://gh.opera.news/gh/en/politics/7c7ff22255f0d40d624c452749068085 (accessed 29 June 2021).
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women's representation in students' profane language use; The representation of male sexual power in Ghanaian radio commercials; Liberia's 'Iron Lady' vs. George Weah.

Appendix

a. If we are not careful many MP will suffer the same faith (MR)
b. We are encouraging these women to hire assassins to kill their husbands for the sake of becoming their successors. What a wicked Ghana we live in now. This woman has no MORALS. (BK)
c. MP's wives to kill their adwaman husband during election year to take over hmmm Ghana (EY)
d. My husband died in cold blood like this and u expect me to contest? Eiiii what at all do I need if I loose my husband? (MT)
e. The wife should be investigated by a neutral police and forensics concerning the murder of the husband (BY)
f. What will be her message going into the election. My husband is dead so please vote for me. Exchanged of life for power (RR)
g. Opportunist! Where lies your morals? This is a testament to the shredded fabric of the Ghanaian society and culture. Money and power rules over common sense and love. Your deceased husband is not even 6 feet under yet, and all you can think about is the opportunity to cash-in. Shame unto you (MA)
h. Is this woman truly mourning her husband? I can't think far (VG)